

THE POWER OF THE PRESS: ROBERT F. WOLFE AND BILLY IRELAND CREATE A CIVIC CENTER FOR COLUMBUS. OHIO

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The story of how any major civic project becomes a reality is usually an intriguing and complex combination of timing, public acceptance, governmental acquiescence, business leadership and a plan. Columbus has proven to be a tough town to convince, especially when it has come to at least two of these elements--passing bond issues for public improvements and recognizing the need for a plan, in particular, and planning, in general. In this paper, I will explore the creation of a riverfront civic center in Columbus, its antecedents, and two men, Robert F. Wolfe, publisher of the Columbus Dispatch, and William A. "Billy" Ireland, political cartoonist for the Dispatch, both of whom played a very important role in establishing a framework for the success of this project.

The first planning document to mention a civic center for Columbus was The Plan of the City of Columbus with Preliminary Suggestions for an Arterial Highway System, a Park System and the Civic Center (1908). After agitation by George Lattimer, Chairman of the Public Improvements Committee of the Columbus Board of Trade with the support of the City federation of Women's Clubs and the Playground Association, City Council was persuaded to appoint a City Plan Commission of outside consultants headed by the nationally known municipal advisor, Charles Kulford Robinson. In addition to the first two elements mentioned in the title of Robinson's report of 1908, plans for a grand Beaux-Arts civic center were detailed. The "City Beautiful" had arrived in Columbus! The plan received vigorous support from the Board of Trade, soon to be known as the Chamber of Commerce, but comments published in the Dispatch the day after the report was presented were more indicative of the reception this plan would receive:

They are very elaborate, highly artistic and provide for a Columbus of 50 to 100 years from now. The immense cost, however, and the many practical impediments in the way, will prevent their being carried out in anything like their entirety. What is denominated the 'Civic Group' between Broad and State and Fourth and Mitchell Streets is a conspicuous feature of the plans and represents the extreme of the designers' idealism.¹

As late as 1912 the Chamber of Commerce was trying to drum up support at City Council for a bond issue to be put on the ballot mandating purchase of the necessary land to begin the Robinson plan.

However, events of the next year focused attention on the riverfront as the great Flood of 1913 ravaged Columbus' west side and destroyed almost everything on both banks of the Scioto River downtown, including all the downtown bridges leading to the west. Robert F. Wolfe, publisher of the Columbus Dispatch, led the relief effort after the flood. Colleagues mark this as the beginning of his advocacy for a riverfront civic center. A Dispatch article of the 1950s noted:

Sometime during that battle as he helped with the rescue work, he envisioned the Civic

Center. He dreamed of great buildings and green shrubbery and modern bridges with wide avenues. (He) actively supported a flood control plan which resulted in extensive diking and construction of giant concrete walls along the downtown riverbank.²

Timing was key to allowing the city to acquire the land on both sides of the river. Flood control measures had the added effect of removing more of the shabby buildings and debris left in the wake of the flood.

Robert F. Wolfe had come to Columbus in 1888 at the age of twenty-eight from Zanesville via New York, Texas, Cuba and Louisiana. He began as a shoe salesman and later was joined by his brother, Harry P. Wolfe, in partnership to establish a shoe manufacturing company in 1893. By the turn of the century, they had made the production of shoes one of the leading industries of the city. In 1903 the Wolfe Brothers bought Columbus' only morning paper the Ohio State Journal and in 1905 they purchased the Columbus Dispatch. Though neither of the brothers was interested in a high profile in the community, they amassed considerable power as they moved from shoes and newspapers into banking and other investments. As the more civic-minded of the two, Robert was in a unique position to advance the idea of a riverfront civic center both editorially in his papers and through the considerable political influence he wielded at both the state and local level.

He was aided in great measure by the editorial cartoonist for the Dispatch, William A. "Billy" Ireland. Ireland had been born in Chillicothe in the same year as Wolfe. He showed talent as an artist at an early age and at eighteen after graduating from high school accepted a job with the Dispatch as an editorial cartoonist beginning in 1898. Seven years later when the Dispatch was purchased by the Wolfes he began a long and fruitful friendship with both brothers. Lucy Caswell notes in her profile of Billy Ireland for the book More Columbus Unforgettables that: "Over the years Ireland was able to influence the editorial policies of the paper, and eventually he owned stock in the paper."³

Ireland had a stellar list of admirers — Milton Caniff, Will Rogers and James Thurber - just to name a few. Caniff was a student at Ohio State University when Ireland got him a job at the Dispatch. Caniff recalled for Caswell's book, Billy Ireland, that "In readership surveys in those days (the 1920s) there was always just one answer to the question 'Why do you read the Sunday Dispatch?': 'To see the PASSING SHOW!'"⁴ (The Passing Show was a regular Sunday full page collage of color cartoons which ran from 1908 to Ireland's death in 1935.) James Thurber also worked with him at the Dispatch and later wrote a profile that appeared in the New Yorker, titled "Boy from Chillicothe". Thurber noted that while

The Passing Show was largely regional in character, and often purely local, . . . it somehow managed a universal appeal and it became nationally popular among connoisseurs of comic art. Irvin Cobb and George M. Cohan knew and liked the Sunday feature, and Will Rogers, who came to be a great friend of Ireland's, went around telling people, 'I take two newspapers, the New York Times, and the Columbus Dispatch for Billy Ireland's page.'⁵

Ireland was an accomplished political cartoonist but his strength lay in the human interest angle. He was very straightforward and drew on experiences of the average Ohioan using everyday events for his inspiration which endeared him to his readers to the point that in his thirty-seven year career at the Dispatch, his Influence on the public was substantial. Hugh Fullerton, in an article on the leading cartoonists of the day for Collier's magazine in 1924,

acknowledged Ireland's impact in the following passage:

In Ohio he is regarded as a power, and in Columbus the pride of the city. His weekly page is the Hall of Fame of Ohio. He has played a real and vital part in Ohio politics and an even greater one in the civic life of Columbus. . . . Columbus is developing one of the most beautiful civic centers in the world; one of the first and finest in America. Ireland has spent years designing and planning this mass of public and semi-public buildings, bridges, and approaches which, when finished, will be a sort of monument to him.⁶

Though giving him all the credit for designing the civic center would be wrong, he certainly did a good job of promoting it and convincing the public that a civic center on the riverfront was just what Columbus needed.

However, the job of creating a civic center on the riverfront certainly was not easy nor did it happen overnight. It was 1916 before the report from the Chicago engineering firm of Alvord & Burdick was completed. They had been hired by the Franklin County Flood Commission to propose flood control measures. Among other things they called for widening and deepening the channel of the Scioto through Columbus and replacing the city street bridges that were washed away. It took another three years to complete the channel improvements and the first of the bridges--Broad Street--was not finished until 1920. One futile attempt was made to transform the riverfront between Town Street and Broad Street into a park. The Victory Park bond issue failed in 1920.

The Columbus city administration and the City Council were more often than not impediments to planning. In 1910 George Lattimer, Chairman of the public Improvements Committee detailed in the Chamber's annual report the defeat of a proposition to create an independent Park Commission. He blamed the mayor who did not want to give up this power, and labor interests, who he felt would automatically oppose anything that the Chamber suggested.⁷ As was mentioned earlier, it was not possible to prod City Council into putting a bond issue on the ballot in 1912 for the purpose of initiating the Civic Center Plan of 1908.

The Municipal Art Committee of the Chamber tried again in 1916 to introduce city planning in a regularized form. The Committee, of which Billy Ireland was a member, proposed the creation of a city planning commission. Council called it ". . . a waste of time and held the charter was sufficient to provide for the planning of streets and parks."⁸ In fact, the City Planning Commission was only grudgingly created in 1921 after it was apparent that someone would have to administer the new zoning ordinance.

Because of Robert F. Wolfe's demonstrated interest in a civic center and his political influence, he was appointed to serve on that first City Planning Commission. He had become involved earlier in the Ohio Planning Conference, one of the first citizen planning groups in the country. He was a Columbus representative and assisted in planning the early annual meetings of the organization.

The next significant event on the road to the riverfront civic center also happened in 1921 when the old City Hall building across from the capitol on State Street burned to the ground. This necessitated the search for a new site and also the search for money to finance the relocation and construction. Wolfe and Ireland both lobbied for a site on the river. The city administration did its part by approving a \$10 million bond issue to be put on the ballot in 1924. A.C. Shaw, the city's zoning engineer, noted in the City Planning Commission's annual report for that year:

Headed by the secretary of the planning commission, Service Director W.H. Duffy, a short educational campaign was put on. At the November election more than half the voters were of the opinion that the city needed a new city hall and additional site for it, that three grade crossings should be eliminated, and that several much needed intercepting sewers should be built. However, the necessary two-thirds vote was not given. In view of the especial need of at least these four items of the building program it is probable they will be worked out eventually, though the method of accomplishment has not yet been determined.⁹

Returning to 1921 as a pivotal year, it was also fortuitous that a nationally renowned Columbus architect, Frank Packard, had been elected President of the Chamber of Commerce. As a good friend of Wolfe and Ireland, he shared their enthusiasm for a civic center on the river. He had the design expertise and the position in the business community to be able to sell the idea. He presented an outline of a riverfront civic center plan of the Ohio Planning Conference Annual Meeting in Columbus in 1921.

Things were beginning to happen but still at a very slow pace. Wolfe and Ireland kept the project in the spotlight at this time. Reports in the Dispatch indicated almost daily deliberations of the State of Ohio in their efforts to find a new site for the proposed state office building. And Billy Ireland continued to point to the debris in Columbus' 'front yard'--the downtown riverfront.

In his report at the 1932 Ohio Planning Conference's annual meeting, Frank Eno, an O.S.U. civil engineering professor and member of the first city planning commission, noted that ". . . by quiet internal pressure and influence first one and then another building was added to the (Columbus) Civic Center."¹⁰

Listed in chronological order, the civic center consisted of: the channel improvements, 1917-1919; the Broad and Town Street bridges, 1920-1922; Central High School, 1924; AIU Tower, 1927; City Hall, west wing, 1928; Columbus Auditorium, 1928; Central Police Station in 1928; Ohio Department of State Building, 1933; Federal Post Office, 1933-34; City Hall, east wing, 1936; Health and Safety Center, 1953; Veterans' Memorial Coliseum, 1955. Only three of these were actually city buildings, one was the Board of Education's, one was a state building, one was a federal building, one was a county building (three if you count the bridges), and two were privately owned buildings.

It took sixteen years from when the Plan of 1908 was suggested until the first building, Central High School, was constructed in the Civic Center. It then took another thirty years to call it complete. From 1906 when his first cartoon appeared about the Park Commission until his death in 1935, Billy Ireland conveyed the importance of the riverfront and municipal improvements in general. Robert F. Wolfe died in 1927 but from 1913 until then he used the vast resources of his newspapers and his own personal influence to insure that a civic center would become a reality. They were successful to the point that The American City magazine put Columbus' Civic Center on the cover of its February, 1938 issue and lauded it as "one of America's most beautiful civic center developments."¹¹ So the city had arrived with the help of the timing of crucial events, cooperation of governmental bodies, press coverage, boosterism and a plan that was altered considerably but would not die. As George Lattimer pointed out in his annual report from the Chamber's Public Improvements Committee in 1912:

Whether or not they will be successful in carrying out their plans for the bond issue for the Civic Center . . . the campaigns that have been carried on will be of immense value to our

city from an educational standpoint. . . . The constant agitation that has been carried on the last six years is educating our people. The enthusiasts for the advancement of our city should not be discouraged by the defeat of our several attempts to realize some of their hopes and dreams, but should understand that this is educational work that is necessary before our citizens are fully aroused to the necessity and benefit of such work.¹²

This sentiment was echoed by Philip Elwood, representing the Chamber of Commerce, when he spoke about Columbus' Civic Center at the Ohio Planning Conference meeting in 1919. He reported"

About ten years ago the City of Columbus hired an outside planning commission to make a rather elaborate report and a more elaborate set of plans. . . . These plans have fallen by the wayside, as was the custom at the time. But even though those plans have never been carried out in full, yet they have been great educational factors. . . . The city of Columbus treated its riverfront as a sewer and as a place for the worst tenements. . . . The idea now is to clean out that portion of the city turn our faces toward it and make it a cleansing stream which will be a bright spot and the focal point for a radiating system of boulevards.¹³

I think it is interesting to note that even twenty years after the completion of the Civic Center Wolfe and Ireland's contributions were remembered. Two examples for the 1950s serve to illustrate this point.

In 1952 City Council voted to appropriate \$25,000 to build a commemorative fountain to be named "The Pioneers of Civic Center Planning Memorial Fountain." It was to honor Columbus' first city planning commission members, among them Robert F. Wolfe and Frank Packard. Elmer Keller, the city's Service Director at that time, was also quoted as saying that "the fountain will also serve as a tribute to the late Billy Ireland, Columbus Dispatch cartoonist, who did much to awaken interest in city planning."¹⁴

A final note on the success of the Civic Center and its backers was given in a speech by Edwin S. Burdell, Columbus native and President of the Cooper Union at the time of his address to the American Planning and Civic Association annual meeting in 1953. His topic was planning in Columbus and he began by mentioning the 1908 Plan and its aftermath:

While this scheme was never implemented as such, the very fact that a challenge had been thrown down to the citizens of Columbus probably eventually led to another sort of civic center along the Scioto River and on sites less expensive to acquire and I must say it is one of the finest in this country. Columbus' development of its riverfront compares favorably with the efforts of Paris and Amsterdam.

Certainly the widening and deepening of the Scioto River at its horseshoe bend through the heart of the City was a monumental achievement and due in part to the activities of Frank L. Packard, as spokesman for the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects he was ably supported by my father's close friends, Robert F. Wolfe and Billy Ireland. Both the Journal and the Dispatch, being locally owned and operated than as now, have always made the improvement of the city a major concern.¹⁵

While it may be an overstatement to "compare favorably" Columbus with Paris and Amsterdam, it certainly was true that Columbus benefited greatly from the collaboration of Wolfe,

the publisher and political force, Packard the respected architect and businessman, and Ireland the cartoonist and booster of Columbus. The Civic Center planners did not have the luxury of unlimited money from bond issues to build a grand plan, but they were leaders who took advantage of circumstances surrounding the clean up of the 1913 Flood to acquire the affected riverfront land, in most cases by condemnation. Ireland and Wolfe kept the idea alive and before the public consciousness for a combined total of over thirty years. One by one educational and governmental bodies were enticed into being a part of the Civic Center. Sometimes they even did it with mirrors, successfully including private buildings not directly on the waterfront but impressive nonetheless, like the AIU Tower and the Columbus Auditorium.

From the 1960s to the early 1980s there has been little mention of the Civic Center, and in fact, the first element, Central High School, is now closed and in danger of demolition. But recently there has been a reawakening of interest in these buildings as a civic group. The city has nominated the Civic Center to be on the National Register of Historic Places which underscores its importance in recent plans for development along the riverfront. Robert F. and Billy would be pleased!

Endnotes

¹ Columbus Dispatch, February 4, 1908, p. 1.

² Ibid., August 12, 1956, p. 29A.

³ Caswell, Lucy. "Billy Ireland," In More Columbus Unforgettables, p. 9.

⁴ Caswell, Lucy and George Loomis, Billy Ireland, p. 13.

⁵ Thurber, James. "Boy from Chillicothe," New Yorker Album. Simon & Schuster, 1952, p. 245.

⁶ Fullerton, Hugh. "Are Cartoonists Human?" Collier's Magazine. November 8, 1924, p. 48.

⁷ Chamber of Commerce. Public Improvements Committee. Report. 1910, p. 34.

⁸ Columbus Dispatch. February 1, 1916, p. 1.

⁹ Annual Report of the City Planning Commission. 1924. p. 114.

¹⁰ Ohio Planning Conference Annual Meeting, 1932. Minutes, p. 78.

¹¹ "The Columbus Civic Center," The American City. February 1938. Cover and p.30.

¹² Chamber of Commerce. Public Improvements Committee, Report. 1912, p. 14.

¹³ Ohio Planning Conference Annual Meeting, 1919. Minutes, p. 13.

¹⁴ Columbus Dispatch. December 16, 1952, p. 1A.

¹⁵ Burdell, Edwin S. "Columbus at the Mid-Century as it Looks to a Former Resident," American Planning and Civic Annual. 1953, pp. 167-68.